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The Myth of Anne Brontë

ABSTRACT: Anne Brontë may be less famous than her sisters, but contemporary popular culture still makes many knowing allusions to her. This article delineates the origins and development of some of the key motifs in representations of the writer’s life, death and literary imagination. Investigating the reasons for this writer’s continuous marginalisation, this examination also explores the ways in which the critical discourse parallels the writer’s re-emergence in popular culture as a feminist figure.

KEYWORDS: Anne Brontë, myth, afterlives.

Anne Brontë has generally been regarded as a ‘sort of literary Cinderella’ even by her admirers.¹ Less charitably, a 2011 episode of the animated series *Family Guy* featured a scene in which a character refers to the ‘third Brontë sister’ as someone ‘outshined’ by their siblings. In a cut-away gag, Charlotte and Emily praise each other for writing *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* until a semi-verbal Anne interrupts them by squawking: ‘I made blood out my lady parts’. This ‘period period joke’ ignores the existence of *Agnes Grey* (1847), *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) and a substantial corpus of poetry by Anne Brontë. Similar sentiments are expressed in Kate Beaton’s ‘Dude Watchin’ with the Brontës’ (2009), a web cartoon that portrays Emily and Charlotte enthusing over a parade of boorish, aggressive men.² Meanwhile, an unheeded Anne protests that one of these men is an ‘asshole’ and that her sisters are attracted to ‘alcoholic dickbags’. Eventually, Charlotte and Emily inform Anne that ‘nobody’ buys her books because her attitude is ‘so inappropriate’. Unlike some other recent depictions of Anne Brontë, Beaton’s lampoon not only acknowledges the writer’s

marginalisation but diagnoses popular culture as unable to stomach her incisive feminist commentary on marriage, alcoholism or male volatility and violence.

‘Dude Watchin’ with the Brontës’ indicates that the cultural mythology that has formed around Anne Brontë is more complex than it initially appears. For further insight into this complexity, this article will explore the development of her individual mythology by examining representations of the writer. Along the way, this consideration aims to shed light on Anne Brontë’s place in the contemporary popular imagination whilst rectifying the neglect of her cultural afterlives in existing scholarship. According to Lucasta Miller in *The Brontë Myth* (2001), the youngest Brontë ‘has never taken on the mythic stature of her sisters in her own right. Though she has by now been rediscovered, for most of her posthumous life she was regarded as very much the least interesting sister’.³ Despite this rediscovery, Anne Brontë’s presence in popular culture remains unanalysed in *Brontë Studies*’s 2014 issue on the Brontës’ afterlives.⁴ Of course, valuable insights can be gleaned from articles by Marion Shaw, Stevie Davies and Marianne Thormählen on the youngest Brontë’s legacy. Nevertheless, they primarily examine Anne Brontë’s changing critical reputation and lack in-depth consideration of her status in popular culture. This lacuna is understandable because Anne Brontë’s individual life and literary work tend to be the subject of brief allusion rather than sustained engagement. No doubt, we can attribute this state of affairs to the actions of her eldest sister and other influential Brontë mythologisers. But other factors need to be remembered. By investigating these factors, this article intends to add nuance to the familiar—and now rather hackneyed—tale of Charlotte Brontë’s suppression of Anne Brontë’s work and reputation.

To begin, this article will delineate the origins and development of some of the key motifs in representations of Anne Brontë’s life, including the fixation upon her death. This investigation also seeks to understand why popular culture unfavourably compares Anne

Brontë's literary imagination with the mythologised, quasi-Romantic 'genius' of her sisters. Yet representations of the Brontës sometimes overturn or question the youngest sister's marginalisation. To understand this phenomenon, the final part of this article intends to analyse Anne Brontë's individual mythology in conjunction with her critical re-evaluation and partial re-emergence in popular culture as an influential feminist. Before exploring this matter, however, it is necessary to situate Anne Brontë and her life within the broader scope of the Brontë myth.

Mythologising the Life and Many Deaths of Anne Brontë

So what are the leitmotifs of Anne Brontë's myth? As 'Dude Watchin' with the Brontës' exemplifies, many mentions of the writer mock her cultural marginalisation with an arch knowingness. In Rachel Ferguson's *The Brontës Went to Woolworths* (1931), a character opines that '[isn't] it artistically complete that there isn't a quotable line recorded of Anne? Wasn't there some sort of fate which ordained that she, of all the family, should be buried away from home, dying, meek, futile, on that Scarborough sofa.'⁵ A similar reference occurs in Elizabeth Taylor's *At Mrs Lippincotes's* (1945), in which the heroine Julia accompanies her husband to a posting near Scarborough where she embarks upon a flirtation with an RAF Wing Commander based upon their shared appreciation of the Brontës. In one of their meetings, he describes his pilgrimage to Anne Brontë's grave until Julia deflates him with gruesome speculation about the state of the writer's bones. As such quips illustrate, Anne Brontë has often been recognised less for her literary achievements than for her death and burial.

Anne Brontë's defenders often struggle to counter this prevailing impression because portraying the youngest Brontë means reconstructing a narrative that is often missing its central character. This difficulty reflects that—apart from her novels—few of Anne Brontë's

written documents survive and most other primary sources mention her only in passing. Edward Chitham's *A Life of Anne Brontë* (1991), for example, recounts a trip taken by the teenage Anne and Charlotte Brontë to Huddersfield in 1836 that includes a lengthy description of their visit to see the Walker family. The visit's retelling is based upon a letter written by Charlotte Brontë in which her 'sole reference to her sister comes in her use of the plural pronoun in her letter to Ellen Nussey: "*We* spent the day at Lascelles Hall [emphasis in original]."' ⁶ As Chitham admits, he can only speculate about his subject's experience because all of his evidence about the outing is 'external' to her.⁷ The same issue afflicts Philippa Stone's *The Captive Dove* (1968), the only Brontë biofiction that I have found that features Anne as the main character. Despite seemingly concentrating on her, *The Captive Dove* relates her period of employment at Thorp Green primarily from the perspectives of Branwell, Lydia Robinson and the Robinson's physician, Dr Crosby. In these ways, these examples call attention to and re-enact the way that Anne Brontë has been mediated by other interested parties.

Our knowledge of Anne Brontë has been shaped by Charlotte Brontë's efforts to ameliorate the outrage and disgust aroused by *Wildfell Hall*. By 1848, the 'Bell brothers' already had risqué reputations but they garnered outright condemnation when Thomas Newby published Acton Bell's second novel. For instance, *Wildfell Hall* led the *North American Review* to declare that 'the whole firm of Bell & Co. seem to have a sense of the depravity of human nature peculiarly their own' and Acton Bell was singled out for taking 'a morose satisfaction in developing a full and complete science of human brutality'.⁸ In response, Charlotte Brontë requested that *Wildfell Hall* not be republished after Anne Brontë's death and her actions had a long-lasting, detrimental effect on the youngest Brontë's literary reputation. Charlotte Brontë's publishers respected her wishes during her lifetime, but Thomas Hodgson issued a cheaply printed edition of *Wildfell Hall* in 1854. This version was

abridged, substantially rearranged and lacking the preface included in Newby's second edition. Hodgson's corrupted text would become the basis of almost all British editions of *Wildfell Hall* until the latter half of the twentieth century. As late as 1977, the only British versions of *Wildfell Hall* containing the complete text and preface were the second Newby edition and the 1931 Shakespeare Head edition.⁹

As well as limiting the dissemination of *Wildfell Hall*, Charlotte Brontë laid the foundations for her younger sister's reputation as the least talented, blandest Brontë when she penned the 'Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell' for her edition of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes* in 1850. In addition to comparing Anne Brontë unfavourably to Emily Brontë, Charlotte Brontë ignored her youngest sister's literary achievements and directed attention towards her blameless life to obfuscate *Wildfell Hall*. Compounding Charlotte Brontë's efforts, Elizabeth Gaskell had little to say about *Wildfell Hall* in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) apart from describing the novel as 'painfully discordant from one who would fain have sheltered herself from all but peaceful and religious ideas.'¹⁰ Thereafter, Anne Brontë's gentleness becomes entrenched enough in the Brontë myth to be an ongoing joke in Stella Gibbons's *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932), a comic novel in which the character of Mr Meyerburg expounds outrageous conspiracies about the Brontë family. Perhaps most spuriously, he claims that the Brontë sisters stole their brother's works because they 'were all drunkards, but Anne was the worst of the lot. Branwell who adored her, used to pretend to get drunk at the Black Bull in order to get gin for Anne.'¹¹ The humour of this passage not only overturns the stereotypical view of Anne Brontë but also gestures to the fact that her most famous work condemned and exposed the destruction caused by alcoholism. In this way, Gibbons manages to exploit and subvert Anne Brontë's reputation as the mildest, least scandalous Brontë.

If the youngest Brontë is chiefly remembered for being unmemorable, she does play a central role in one much mythologised episode of her life: her death in Scarborough. The significance accorded to this period reflects that we have an unusual amount of material relating to Anne Brontë's last days, elucidating the extent to which other periods in her life have to be pieced together from unsatisfactory evidence. This occasion's fame can be traced back to Gaskell, who ensured Anne Brontë's demise is well documented. This part of the biography includes Anne Brontë's letter to Nussey and this letter—despite being enclosed within another missive from Charlotte Brontë—allows a relatively unmediated Anne Brontë to speak for herself. Gaskell admits that the document is 'the only time we seem to be brought into direct personal contact with this gentle, patient girl.'¹² In this note, Anne Brontë goes against Charlotte Brontë's wishes and proposes a plan for Nussey to accompany her to Scarborough to maximise the likelihood of her recovery.

Yet Gaskell's portrayal still construes Anne Brontë as a moribund, shrinking violet. In Gaskell's *Life*, the period of Anne Brontë's illness covers several months, lasts eighteen uninterrupted pages and transforms her death into the central event of her life during which, for once, her siblings do not overshadow her. Throughout this account, Gaskell ignores Anne Brontë's will to survive in favour of lauding her patient submission to her impending fate. These qualities become Anne Brontë's distinguishing characteristics in popular and critical accounts. As Shaw observes, Anne Brontë's death is 'tinged with saintliness' and has 'become as legendary as Keats's'.¹³ Even when biographical or critical accounts challenge Gaskell's portrait, they still interpret Anne Brontë's last days as emblematic of her entire life and character. Chitham, for instance, focuses upon the steadfastness of the youngest Brontë's religious faith and interprets her last poem as an acknowledgment of her coming death. Other biographers have adopted an opposing stance, viewing the circumstances of Anne Brontë's death as demonstrating her determination to live. In *Anne Brontë: The Other One* (1989),

Elizabeth Langland emphasises the author's will to survive and foregrounds her 'indefatigable' desire to visit York Minister on the way to Scarborough.¹⁴

The preoccupation with the writer's death means that efforts to differentiate her from the rest of her family often focus upon her grave, away from her siblings, in Scarborough. In the ITV television documentary 'The Brilliant Brontë Sisters' (2013), the segment dealing with Anne Brontë begins with the presenter Sheila Hancock laying flowers on the author's grave before narrating the writer's 'gentle and brave' death. Critical accounts discuss her grave in a similar manner. Langland contends that Anne Brontë's separation in death 'is an eloquent testimony to her individuality, which has too often been lost in the myths of the Brontë sisters.'¹⁵ Likewise, Chitham posits that 'the youngest sister, had in her final hours escaped from the kindly dominion of the Brontë family, as she had throughout her artistic life laid claim to judgment not as a minor Brontë, but as a major literary figure in her own right.'¹⁶ Such statements overlook the fact that it was Charlotte Brontë who decided where to inter her sister's body and that her motivations were practical, rather than metaphorical.¹⁷ Nevertheless, Anne Brontë's grave has become a convenient but over-determined symbol of her uniqueness and literary significance.

Anne Brontë's death has become the lens through which we understand her life and has been interpreted in order to obfuscate but also celebrate *Wildfell Hall*. Yet the emphasis on Anne Brontë's expiration continues to be another factor overshadowing her life and work as an author. Her death cult has arisen, in part, because her literary imagination is more difficult to mythologise than those of her sisters. Exploring this matter, the next section of this article considers how critical discourse and popular culture have conceived of the writer's authorship and literary imagination.

'no genius': Representations of Anne Brontë's Literary Imagination

In 1912, May Sinclair made the judgment that Anne Brontë might have made an important contribution to literature but ‘had no genius’.¹⁸ A similar view is advanced in Polly Teale’s more recent play *Brontë* (2005), which seemingly overturns but actually reiterates received wisdoms about the literary sisters. Anne’s character remains peripheral for most of the drama but does step forward during the meta-theatrical opening to state: ‘I am not so interesting to you...My books will be read as background to their great works.’¹⁹ As they create ‘their great works’, the characters of Charlotte and Emily are often accompanied by external figures who personify their literary struggles and their inspiration. Yet Anne has no corresponding device to portray her creative process and her lack implies that the historical writer did not possess her sisters’ ambition and talent. This representation of the Brontës calls attention to the fact that Anne Brontë does not fit within the paradigm of Romantic genius. This article now proposes that disparagements of Anne Brontë’s literary talents reflect broader cultural discourses about the nature of creativity.

Anne Brontë’s reputation as the least talented Brontë was encouraged by the writings of early Brontë mythologisers, who frequently distorted the agency and motivation of her literary imagination. In the ‘Biographical Notice’, Charlotte Brontë dismissed *Wildfell Hall* as ‘an entire mistake’ before explaining that Anne Brontë had

been called on to contemplate, near at hand, and for a long time, the terrible effects of talents misused and faculties abused; hers was a naturally sensitive, reserved, and dejected nature; what she saw sank very deeply into her mind; it did her harm. She brooded over it till she believed it to be a duty to reproduce every detail (of course with fictitious characters, incidents, and situations) as a warning to others.²⁰

Though deliberately vague about who inspired Anne Brontë, Charlotte Brontë's apology provided the foundations for Gaskell's attempts to excuse *Wildfell Hall* by offering explanations that further diminished the youngest Brontë's literary standing.

Gaskell also made few comments about Anne Brontë's writing but enabled a later mythology to arise around *Wildfell Hall*'s genesis through her efforts to divert scandal away from the Brontë sisters onto their brother. In *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*'s first edition in 1857, Gaskell relates Branwell Brontë's involvement with 'a mature and wicked woman', the mother of the family that had engaged him as a tutor.²¹ This woman was easily identifiable as Lydia Robinson, who launched a libel case that meant references to her had to be deleted from the second edition of the biography that was printed in May of the same year. In the third edition of the biography, Gaskell is even cagier about what Branwell Brontë actually did. Nevertheless, Gaskell explicitly mentions that Anne Brontë was a governess in the same family and 'was thus a miserable witness to her brother's deterioration of character at this period.'²² Accentuating Anne Brontë's role as bystander to Branwell Brontë's downfall, Gaskell's statement reinforces her later explanation that Anne Brontë had been motivated to write *Wildfell Hall* after seeing 'the deterioration of a character whose profligacy and ruin took their rise in habits of intemperance'.²³ Because of Gaskell and Charlotte Brontë, a common perception has arisen that Anne Brontë created *Wildfell Hall*'s Huntingdon wholly in response to Branwell Brontë's dissolution and death.

Famous for being the passive witness to Branwell Brontë's 'profligacy and ruin', Anne Brontë has been turned into the secondary figure in *Wildfell Hall*'s creation by popular culture. This scenario is the underlying premise of Stone's *The Captive Dove* (1968), a title that quotes one of Anne Brontë's best-known poems to imply the writer's imprisonment as she watches her brother's downfall. Large sections of the novel are told from the perspective of Dr Crosby, who reads *Wildfell Hall* at the end and assumes that Branwell was the 'living

model' for its dissolute male characters and imagines 'the kind of scenes the girls must have witnessed during the last months of Branwell's life'.²⁴ Likewise, the documentary 'The Brilliant Brontë Sisters' featured a lengthy consideration of Branwell Brontë's drug and alcohol addiction in which the presenter concluded that out of Branwell Brontë's tragedy 'came a wonderful book by Anne, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. It is one of the best studies of alcoholism and its effect on the family and everyone around them that I have ever read.'

Through the omission of certain details, these representations of Anne Brontë's inspiration do not directly state but also avoid contradicting the widespread belief that Branwell Brontë inspired Huntingdon's deathbed scenes. Yet he was still living when *Wildfell Hall* was published and 'nor did his family foresee his imminent demise even when Anne wrote the preface to the second edition.'²⁵ Undoubtedly, Anne Brontë's biographical experiences did influence her writing but, in all likelihood, she also drew upon additional sources to write about Huntingdon's terminal illness. Indeed, Thormählen notes that the description of Huntingdon's physical and spiritual disintegration accords with contemporary medical discourse to the extent that his fate appears to be a 'textbook case' of what were believed to be alcoholism's effects in the nineteenth century.²⁶ As Thormählen's observation underscores, biographical explanations of *Wildfell Hall* frequently obscure the intellectual and imaginative dimensions of Anne Brontë's work in favour of construing her as a passive medium who channelled Branwell Brontë's tragedy into *Wildfell Hall*.

Another reason that popular culture focuses upon the passive tragedy of *Wildfell Hall*'s creation is that Anne Brontë is not mythologised as possessing the internalised, transcendent creative desires that are associated with her sisters and Romantic genius. As one of the most 'seductive and enduring models of literary authorship', Romantic genius has had an undeniable effect upon conceptualisations of the Brontës' literary imagination.²⁷ Much of popular culture's understanding of creativity can be traced back to Romantic poets'

pronouncements on their inspiration and genius. William Wordsworth, for example, posited that ‘Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity’. With this claim, Wordsworth construed creative inspiration as artlessly instinctive, grounded in feeling and an expression of the writer’s inner self. His influence can be seen in the way that Teale’s *Brontë* uses on-stage figures to personify the internalised workings of Charlotte and Emily’s literary genius.

In contradistinction to Charlotte and Emily Brontë, neither Anne Brontë nor her earliest mythologisers conceptualised her literary imagination in Romantic terms. In the preface to Newby’s second edition of *Wildfell Hall*, Anne Brontë responded to the scandal surrounding her novel but also rejected Romantic conceptualisations of creativity. Making her clearest statement of artistic intent, she asserts that *Wildfell Hall* was ‘carefully copied from life’ and that her intention was ‘to tell the truth, for truth always conveys its own moral to those who are able to receive it.’²⁸ Her insistence that she was committed to ‘a most scrupulous avoidance of exaggeration’ draws attention to her concern with external matters and invalidates the possibility that her work is an expression of her internal genius.²⁹ Strengthening this impression, Charlotte Brontë portrays her sister as burdened with the belief that she ‘must be honest; she must not varnish, soften, or conceal’ to emphasise that Anne Brontë ‘hated her work, but would pursue it.’³⁰ Such accounts upend Keats’s assertion that if literary inspiration ‘comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all.’ In contrast to Romantic models of creativity, Anne Brontë laboured grimly and dispassionately to impart her message to her readers.

Her resistance to Romantic notions of genius means that Anne Brontë has never attained the fame of her sisters. Hence, the play *Brontë* exhibits far less interest in representing the youngest Brontë’s imagination or creative process. Teale claims that her decision not to create an external figure for Anne’s literary imagination is in keeping with the

fact that the youngest Brontë wrote with a ‘much stronger social, political agenda [than her sisters]. It was less about her deep unconscious needs, her inner world, and more of a social document; a tool to provoke reform, to expose injustice.’³¹ Such a justification, however, supports Thormählen’s comment that Anne Brontë’s literary reputation has suffered because her creative process ‘jars against sensibilities trained to place original imaginativeness above “copying” of any kind, and to resist anything that looks like preaching.’³² As Teale’s play indicates, popular culture has generally derived far more drama from Charlotte and Emily Brontës’ internalised Romantic genius than Anne Brontë’s moral concerns or interest in the external world.

For this reason, Anne Brontë does not excite the type of popular interest that often focuses on the slippages between an author’s life and art. Once again, this preoccupation can be traced back to Romanticism. According to David Higgins, ‘Romantic emphasis on the individual consciousness behind artistic creation—and on the exceptional nature of genius—contributed to an increasing fascination with the personalities and private lives of creative artists.’³³ As such, Romanticism instigated a type of literary celebrity that anticipated and continues to manifest around the other Brontë sisters, albeit in different ways. In Emily Brontë’s case, little is known about her life but these absences ‘have made her all the more magnetic, and some colourful apocrypha has emerged to fill the gaps’ in an effort to explain or trace the source of her seemingly unlikely talent.³⁴ Contrastingly, we have a wealth of knowledge about Charlotte Brontë that enables us to perceive her likeness to her heroines and, thereby, engenders much speculation about the writer’s elaboration and distortion of her personal experiences. Yet Anne Brontë does not inspire the same mythologising as her sisters because the relationship between her life and art appears more obvious. Like Charlotte Brontë and her characters, many apparent similarities exist between Anne Brontë and the heroine of *Agnes Grey* but this subdued work supports the assumption that the author’s art draws

straightforwardly upon her unexceptional experiences. Meanwhile, *Wildfell Hall* abounds with dramatic incidents. Yet the rich, beautiful and socially superior Helen Huntingdon shares few correspondences with her creator. When advanced, biographical readings of Anne Brontë's work construe her imaginative methods as much less mysterious than those of her sisters. These interpretations—such as *Wildfell Hall* developed from the writer's 'extensive and intimate experience at Thorp Green with the gentlemanly class'—support the notion that Anne Brontë merely recorded (rather than imaginatively transformed) what she saw.³⁵

Nevertheless, popular culture will occasionally distinguish Anne Brontë as the most capable and, by some measures, successful writer in the family. The sisters' differences are recognised in *Psychobitches* (2013-14), Sky Arts's comedy sketch show that imagines famous historical women's visits to a psychotherapist (Rebecca Front). In several respects, the 2013 sketch merely recycles familiar tropes about Anne Brontë. Yet the scene also reminds contemporary audiences of the nineteenth-century furore surrounding Anne Brontë's work and points out that she was not always the forgotten sister. For most of their therapy session, the two foul-mouthed elder sisters bicker, belittle each other's literary success and ignore Anne (Sarah Solemani). Eventually, Anne pipes up 'I wrote a book.' In response, Charlotte (Selina Griffiths) and Emily (Katy Brand) jeer at her for being 'as soft as a mouldy teacake' and a governess who was 'beat up by her own kids'. Reacting to their insults, Anne slyly mutters 'my book sold out in six weeks' and provokes sisterly fisticuffs on the psychotherapist's couch. The exchange hints at her cutting insight and ability to undermine her seemingly dominant sisters, enabling the sketch to overturn popular culture's prevailing impressions of the historical Anne Brontë.

Similarly, Jude Morgan's biofictional novel *The Taste of Sorrow* acknowledges the youngest Brontë as the most productive writer in the family. According to Morgan, he was surprised when his research on the family revealed Anne Brontë's 'strength of character' and

the fact that, of all the Brontës, she ‘was the most successful in living in the wider world, and was also startlingly focused and professional as a writer’.³⁶ The effect of this discovery can be seen in Anne’s characterisation. During her time at Thorp Green, Anne eschews the imaginative worlds previously shared with Emily but continues to write as she also finds ‘it was not possible to live entirely without consolations—though it was possible to live entirely without illusions’.³⁷ Watching Anne write, Charlotte observes that *Wildfell Hall* is ‘well done, it is very well done, but this account of a drunkard’s decline, so bare, so inescapable—should Anne do it? Somehow it is like someone you love grinding away at a task until their hands bleed’.³⁸ Though her distrust of illusion and imaginative abandonment distinguishes her from her sisters, the same quality enables Anne to craft *Wildfell Hall*. In these ways, *The Taste of Sorrow* does not denigrate Anne’s literary imagination and realism as less impressive than her sisters’ Romantic ‘genius’, but instead foregrounds her creative discipline and courage.

Through its portrayal of Anne, Morgan’s novel advocates that the youngest Brontë’s achievements should be judged according to a different set of criteria from the one that celebrates her sisters. Yet her literary works’ realism and didacticism have, for the most part, prevented Anne Brontë from achieving her sisters’ fame. That said, this article will now explore how these qualities have led to the feminist reassessment of her work in the critical discourse and—to an extent—popular culture.

Anne Brontë’s Feminist Rediscovery

Until the 1960s, Anne Brontë was usually presented as ‘weak and ultra-feminine, the complete opposite of her heroine Helen Huntingdon’.³⁹ Since then, a sea change has occurred and the critical discourse regards *Wildfell Hall* as ‘something of a classic of mid-Victorian

feminist protest'.⁴⁰ If critics now frequently recognise Anne Brontë as a radical and political feminist, has she also become a feminist icon in the contemporary popular culture?

Of course, a steady band of commentators has argued that Anne Brontë was a forerunner of and inspiration for the later feminist movement. As mentioned, Sinclair made the pronouncement that the author 'had no genius'. Yet she also maintained that the scenes in *Wildfell Hall* depicting the breakdown of the Huntingdon's marriage 'would hold their own in the literature of revolt that followed' and made the novel a unique example of 'mid-Victorian literature'.⁴¹ Sinclair's point corresponds with Jessica Cox's argument that *Wildfell Hall* is 'a forerunner to the more overtly feminist fiction of the *fin de siècle*' and that the youngest Brontë was 'an embryonic New Woman'.⁴² These claims do not just occur in the critical discourse but also arise in popular biofictions. At the end of *The Captive Dove*, the character of Dr Crosby marvels at the courage of *Wildfell Hall*'s heroine before ruminating that the 'Feminists talked so much nonsense about the position of women in 1849... Yet all over the world, fetters were being broken, and the old rules of conduct challenged. And little Miss Brontë was there to lead the rebels'.⁴³ Similarly, Anne Brontë was described as anticipating the later feminist movement by the Brontë scholars Patsy Stoneman and Pam Hirsch when they appeared on the BBC Radio 4's daily magazine show *Woman's Hour* in 2011.⁴⁴ In an example of critical and popular discourses converging, the programme made the writer's feminism explicit to its listeners. Hirsch, for example, described the author as 'the most radical' Brontë sister who 'hit all the nails on the head that the organised women's movement took up' while Stoneman proposed that *Wildfell Hall* critiqued *Jane Eyre*'s sexual politics. To end the segment on Anne Brontë, the presenter Jane Garvey stressed that *Wildfell Hall*'s feminist themes mean that it is a 'terribly important book'.

This radio programme clarifies much about Anne Brontë's presence and her significance as a feminist within contemporary culture. Earlier in this article, I mentioned

how Beaton's 'Dude Watchin' with the Brontës' hints that Anne Brontë's feminism has limited her popular appeal. On the surface, this explanation appears substantiated by *Woman's Hour*. In this episode, Hirsch and Stoneman's interview introduced a new ten-part serialisation of *Wildfell Hall* for *Woman's Hour*'s daily drama segment. This adaptation appeared a few weeks after the UK releases of cinematic versions of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*. Clearly calculated to exploit the interest generated by these films, the *Wildfell Hall* adaptation was still in the much lower-profile and cheaper medium of radio. These facts support the impression that Charlotte and Emily Brontë continue to overshadow their younger sister. Yet this adaptation of *Wildfell Hall* is noteworthy if we consider the broader significance of the cultural institution of *Woman's Hour*. *Woman's Hour* was launched in 1946 with the intention of helping women recreate domestic life after WWII, but its tone and purpose has shifted as 'the woman's movement brought other issues into the foreground of debate about women's lives.'⁴⁵ *Woman's Hour* is known for advancing a 'common sense acceptance of women's rights', and this episode reveals that Anne Brontë has achieved a degree of recognition in the parts of popular culture that are receptive to and associated with feminism.⁴⁶

When it recognises Anne Brontë, popular culture echoes the many critics who contend that the writer's feminism is inextricable from her commitment to artistic 'truth' or realism. Sinclair, for example, praised the 'deliberate, open-eyed' nature of *Wildfell Hall*'s portrayal of marriage.⁴⁷ Similarly, Shaw proposes that Anne Brontë's truth 'was contained in the stories of her own experiences as a governess' that led her to oppose 'current notions of masculinity and femininity'.⁴⁸ In the *Woman's Hour* discussion of *Wildfell Hall*, Stoneman and Hirsch also proposed that Anne Brontë's feminism and writings were inspired by the 'real-life' case of Caroline Norton and her 'six years' as a governess. In a similar manner, 'Dude Watchin' with the Brontës' portrays Anne responding to her sisters' ridicule by crying

out ‘I’m just telling the truth!’ Her rejoinder references the opening passage of *Agnes Grey* and Anne Brontë’s preface to the second edition of *Wildfell Hall*. On the whole, the writer has received censure for her didactic realism. But as Beaton’s cartoon reminds us, her willingness to tell ‘the truth’ about ‘alcoholic dickbags’ means that she is occasionally construed as a figurehead for the nineteenth-century women’s movement.

Conclusion

In Beaton’s cartoon, Anne’s zest for truthfulness leads her to share her controversial observations but her sisters still struggle to understand her creative vision. As such, Beaton’s satire signposts the wider limitations of how popular culture mostly conceives of Anne Brontë’s imaginative inspiration and creative process. Of course, popular culture will occasionally look beyond the ‘myth’ of Romantic genius and celebrate the youngest Brontë as an incisive, unflinching feminist. Even so, she remains overlooked and she is chiefly notable for not being noted. The most obvious reason is Charlotte Brontë and then Gaskell, who ensured that Anne Brontë ‘would never gain the iconic status of her sisters’.⁴⁹ As the youngest Brontë’s most recent biographer maintains, when *Wildfell Hall* ‘was spoken of, it was often by people who regurgitated Charlotte’s view that it was a mistake that did not deserve to be published’ and this perception ‘continued, largely unchecked, for over 100 years’.⁵⁰ But can Anne Brontë’s continuing cultural anonymity also be attributed to her representation of herself and her literary imagination?

Indeed, Anne Brontë constructs an invisible authorial persona that bespeaks a desire for anonymity in the ‘Preface’ to *Wildfell Hall*. In a curious double manoeuvre, she explicitly distinguishes Acton Bell from Currer and Ellis but also states that ‘whether the name be real or fictitious, it cannot greatly signify to those who know him only by his works’.⁵¹ Then, she advises her readership on how to read *Wildfell Hall* using several complex metaphors. Firstly,

the 'Preface' compares the task of decoding *Wildfell Hall* to the retrieval of a 'priceless treasure' from the 'bottom of a well' and further contends that those seeking the work's truth must have 'some courage to dive for it, especially as he that does so will be likely to incur more scorn and obloquy for the mud and water into which he has ventured to plunge, than thanks for the jewel he procures'.⁵² Such a comparison calls attention to the reader's labour and bravery in decoding *Wildfell Hall*'s message. Anne Brontë further suggests the meaning or power of a creative work lies not in its creator but in the response of the reader through another evocative scenario. According to the 'Preface', 'she who undertakes the cleansing of a careless bachelor's apartment will be liable to more abuse for the dust she raises, than commendation for the clearance she effects.'⁵³ Critiquing those who overlook the effects of a woman's work in favour of focusing upon the woman, this claim continues to foreground the reader's duty to decode the novel whilst insisting on the author's insignificance. According to its 'Preface', readers cannot discern the answers to *Wildfell Hall* by turning their attention towards its creator.

Anne Brontë constructed an anonymous authorial persona for herself and described her literary imagination in ways that contributed to her partial cultural erasure. Though she has begun to acquire some popular recognition as a feminist foremother, her self-representation and her representation by her contemporaries mean that she remains on the fringes of the Brontë myth.

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¹ George Moore, *Conversations in Ebury Street* (London: William Heinemann, 1930), p. 222. For the purposes of clarity, this article will refer to the historical members of the Brontë family by their full name and will use first names to refer to fictionalised versions of them.

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- ³ Lucasta Miller, *The Brontë Myth* (London: Vintage, 2002), p. xi.
- ⁴ Special Issue: Afterlives of the Brontës: Biography, Fiction and Literary Criticism, ed. by Birgit Van Puymbroeck, Olivia Malfait and Marisa Demoor, *Brontë Studies* 39 (2014).
- ⁵ Rachel Ferguson, *The Brontës Went to Woolworths* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), p. 90.
- ⁶ Edward Chitham, *A Life of Anne Brontë* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 49.
- ⁷ Chitham, p. 49.
- ⁸ Edwin Percy Whipple, 'on *Wuthering Heights* from "Novels of the Season", *North American Review*', in *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Miriam Allott (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 247-8 (p. 247).
- ⁹ G.D. Hargreaves, 'Further Omissions in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*', *Brontë Studies*, 17 (1977), 115-21 (p. 119).
- ¹⁰ Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. by Alan Shelston (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p. 344.
- ¹¹ Stella Gibbons, *Cold Comfort Farm* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 102.
- ¹² Gaskell, p. 364.
- ¹³ Marion Shaw, 'Anne Brontë: A Quiet Feminist', *Brontë Studies*, 38 (1994), 125-35 (p. 125).
- ¹⁴ Elizabeth Langland, *Anne Brontë: The Other One* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p. 23.
- ¹⁵ Langland, p. 23.
- ¹⁶ Chitham, p. 186.
- ¹⁷ According to Juliet Barker, Charlotte Brontë wanted to bury Anne Brontë quickly to prevent their elderly father from 'making the long and difficult journey from Haworth to Scarborough to attend the funeral.' Juliet Barker, *The Brontës*, revised edn (London: Abacus, 2010), p. 702.
- ¹⁸ May Sinclair, *The Three Brontës* (Hutchinson & Co, 1912), p. 54.
- ¹⁹ Polly Teale, *Brontë*, revised edn (London: Nick Hern Books, 2011), I, p. 6.
- ²⁰ Charlotte Brontë, 'Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell', in Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, ed. by David Daiches (London: Penguin, 1985), pp. 30-6 (p. 34).
- ²¹ Gaskell, p. 273.
- ²² Gaskell, p. 547.
- ²³ Gaskell, p. 344.
- ²⁴ Philippa Stone, *The Captive Dove* (London: Robert Hale, 1968), p. 225.
- ²⁵ Marianne Thormählen, 'The Villain of *Wildfell Hall*: Aspects and Prospects of Arthur Huntingdon', *Modern Language Review*, 98 (1993), 831-41 (p. 841).
- ²⁶ Thormählen, 'The Villain of *Wildfell Hall*', p. 838.
- ²⁷ Julian North, 'Romantic Genius on Screen: Jane Campion's *Bright Star* (2009) and Julien Temple's *Pandaemonium* (2000)', in *The Writer on Film: Screen Literary Authorship*, ed. Judith Buchanan (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 77-91 (p. 77).
- ²⁸ Anne Brontë, 'Preface', in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, ed. by Stevie Davies (London: Penguin, 1996), 3-5 (p. 4).
- ²⁹ Anne, 'Preface', p.3.
- ³⁰ Charlotte Brontë, 'Biographical Notice', p. 34.
- ³¹ Polly Teale, 'Reality and Fiction: An Interview with Polly Teale', in *Brontë*, Polly Teale, revised edn (London: Nick Hern Books, 2011), v-viii (p. vii).
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- ³⁵ Langland, p. 52.
- ³⁶ Jude Morgan, 'An Interview with Jude Morgan', in *The Taste of Sorrow*, Jude Morgan (London: Headline Review, 2009), p. 446.
- ³⁷ Jude Morgan, *The Taste of Sorrow* (London: Headline Review, 2009), p. 237.
- ³⁸ Morgan, pp. 361-2.
- ³⁹ Miller, p. 157.
- ⁴⁰ Ian Ward, 'The Case of Helen Huntingdon', *Criticism*, 49 (2007), 151-82 (p. 151).
- ⁴¹ Sinclair, p. 54.
- ⁴² Jessica Cox, 'Gender, Conflict, Continuity: Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) and Sarah Grand's *The Heavenly Twins* (1893)', *Brontë Studies*, 35 (2010), 30-9 (p. 31, p. 38).

⁴³ Stone, p. 223.

⁴⁴ 'The Tenant of Wildfell Hall', *Woman's Hour*, BBC Radio Four, 28 November 2011.

⁴⁵ Jane Arthurs and Usha Zacharias, 'Introduction', *Feminist Media Studies*, 7 (2007), 333-48 (p. 334).

⁴⁶ Danica Minic, 'What Makes an Issue A *Woman's Hour* Issue?', *Feminist Media Studies*, 8 (2008), 301-15 (p. 313).

⁴⁷ Sinclair, p. 54.

⁴⁸ Shaw, p.126, p. 127.

⁴⁹ Miller, p.157.

⁵⁰ Nick Holland, *In Search of Anne Brontë* (Stroud: The History Press, 2016), p. 262.

⁵¹ Anne Brontë, 'Preface', p. 5.

⁵² Anne Brontë, 'Preface', p. 3.

⁵³ Anne Brontë, 'Preface', p. 3.